

Editorial.

Exchange and Non-Exchange: Confronting Borders in the History of the Black Sea

by Alexander E. Balistreri and Boris Belge

It is possible, perhaps, to pinpoint the exact day on which all the sides of the Black Sea were at their closest to one another, symbolically speaking. On 3 January 1922, Mikhail Frunze, as extraordinary representative of the Ukrainian SSR to Turkey, invited Turkish and other dignitaries to the Ukrainian embassy in Ankara. The flags of Soviet Ukraine, Soviet Russia, Soviet Azerbaijan, and Turkey stood proudly at the front of the dining hall under the words “Long Live the Entente of the Peoples of the East.” More Turkish and Ukrainian flags adorned the walls. Frunze addressed the assembled dignitaries and commended the recent signing of the Turkish-Ukrainian Treaty of Friendship and Fraternity. Mustafa Kemal Paşa (later Atatürk) responded warmly. “It might be said,” remarked the Turkish nationalist leader, “that Ukraine and Turkey are actually two contiguous countries [*iki muttasıl memlekettir*]. Turn your eyes to the north: A sea! But if, for a moment, we imagine the sea to be gone, we see two countries at their closest proximity to one another. The sincere friendship between the peoples of these two countries is equally close.”¹

For the rest of the twentieth century, however, Frunze and Mustafa Kemal’s invitation to erase the Black-Sea barrier from the imagination was not reflected in the real world. Instead, politics and academia on all sides turned inward, hardening the physical and scholarly borders around the Black Sea. On the Turkish side, the state, alongside many historians and ethnographers, enthusiastically pursued efforts to establish the essential Turkishness of the country’s Black-Sea region (*Karadeniz*). Along the coast, the young Turkish Republic insisted on its cabotage rights, ending the predominance of foreign shipping in the southern Black Sea. Indeed, such shipping became an essential issue of the nation-state: The Ottomans, who had given up their exclusive control of the coastline to foreign shipping companies, were now, as Turks, to take command of the country’s shorelines, and especially its coveted Straits.² On land, meanwhile, local populations with “dangerous” connections beyond Turkish borders — the Greek Orthodox or Laz, for example — were either physically removed or somehow “demonstrated” to be Turkish. Old place names of non-Turkish origin were Turkified and the local, pre-Republican archives were destroyed.³ Though the people living in the Turkish Black-Sea region themselves remembered a shared past and only partially adopted the insular approach of official history,⁴ the prospects of pursuing the topic of a shared Black-Sea history remained limited at the academic level. In a delayed reaction to

the end of the Cold War, however, the 2000s saw a spectacular rise in interest in Black Sea regional studies from the Turkish side. Universities began to host regular international conferences on the Black Sea; newly established publishing houses, think tanks, and university departments began to publish several journals on Black Sea studies — journals that show no signs of thirsting for content. Turkish research conducted in the later period has tended to fall into one of three categories: works in security studies, emphasizing Turkish geopolitical and state interests; works highlighting the heritage of Turkish or Turkic peoples around the Black Sea; and works that attempt to reclaim the lost polyethnic heritage of the Turkish Black-Sea region.⁵

As for the northern part of the Black Sea, things did not begin on much better footing. After the establishment of the Soviet Union, researchers concerned themselves mainly with territorial conflicts and contemporary problems in the region, such as the (re-)incorporation of the Southern Caucasus into the Soviet state by the Bolshevik commissar for nationality policies, Iosif Stalin. During the later decades of the Soviet Union, a certain interest was sparked among historians of the eighteenth century toward Catherine II's ambitious geopolitical "Greek Project," but the Black Sea as a contested contact zone between two empires was only rarely the main focus of historical research. Among others Elena Druzhinna stood out as an expert in the eighteenth century. Her work was mainly interested in social and economic history of the northern Black Sea.⁶ During the last years of the Soviet Union and after the end of the Cold War, the Black Sea became the topic of numerous articles, books, and conferences.⁷ However, even these approaches tended to be written or discussed from either a predominantly Russian perspective or from scholars from the field of Middle and Near Eastern studies alone. While this division is not surprising (given the specific needs and demands for research in the field, namely language skills and academic education), it remains an obstacle to the production of a synthetic, cross-regional history of the Black Sea.

Is it possible to bring these disparate realms of scholarship together? This special issue of *Euxeinos*, whose contributors explore the themes of mobility and stasis in modern Black Sea history, emerged from an international workshop that we (the editors) organized at the University of Basel in December 2018. As historians working on these regions on their respective sides of the Black Sea, we had the opportunity to discuss with scholars working on different segments of the region what all of us might learn from one another.⁸ In a keynote address entitled "Black Sea Crossings: Migrants and the Worlds They Made," historian Eileen Kane presented a series of models that historians have used or might use to view the Black Sea as a region. Yet, as Kane admitted, none of these models seemed to work for the Black Sea at all times: The sea was a historical *hub* in some global networks but not in others; it served as a *highway* or *bridge* for merchants, migrants, and agents of modernization, but travel across the Black Sea was usually unidirectional;

it was an *arena* of competition but also, at times, a *mare clausum*. In the symbolic-discursive realm, too, the field of Black Sea studies struck us as ambiguous. We, as scholars, were trying to put the Black Sea at the center of our analysis, but the countries around the Black Sea themselves have often perceived it as more of a “backyard”: Indeed, no internationally recognized state today has its capital on the sea. Eyüp Özveren, a pioneer in the establishment of Black Sea regional studies as a field, goes as far as to call the “Black Sea world” a “permanent frontier zone.”⁹

These contrasting, even contradictory, facets of the Black Sea, along with the institutional fragmentation of twentieth-century scholarship around its shores, have called into question the value of studying the Black Sea as coherent region in modern history.¹⁰ Though they had their precedents, it was particularly starting in the late 1990s that global scholars began to attempt to prove the value in studying the modern history of the Black Sea as a region.¹¹ The large number of academic analyses in the social sciences and area studies today generally focus on the Black Sea merely as a newly *emerging* region of significant geopolitical interest; this “scholarly projection” of regional thinking has been complemented by works intended for a wider audience, reinforcing the idea in the public mind of the region as a coherent object of historical research.¹² Yet the predominant vision of a coherent Black Sea region of security and energy cooperation today does not necessarily tell us about the “regionality” of the Black Sea in modern history. Answering this question, as scholars like Charles King, Eyüp Özveren, and Stephan Troebst, among others have posited, requires weighing various criteria for different historical periods. The following fields have been identified by some or all of these scholars as potential criteria: (1) an endogenous feeling of shared regional identity; (2) the external imposition of “regionality” through cartography or the pursuit of regional geostrategic interests; (3) the weakening or strengthening of state borders vis-à-vis common markets or porous civil societies; and (4) cultural transfer and migration.

With this special issue, we take one of these criteria and posit the degree of exchange or non-exchange as one of the main measures of “regionality” in Black Sea history. The degree to which the geography and geopolitics of the Black Sea allowed—or hindered—exchange and mobility is one of the fundamental questions of today’s scholarly interest in the Black Sea. Research on exchange and mobility has dealt with people, goods, or ideas and has mainly focused on the period after the mid-eighteenth century, when the expansion of the Russian Empire southward began forcing the Ottoman Empire to concede ever more trade on the Black Sea to Russian seafaring. Following the eighteenth-century wars between the two empires, the Black Sea ceased to be an “Ottoman lake” and entered into a phase of intense mobilization and competition between multiple states, groups, and individuals.¹³A

number of recent studies have traced individuals' and groups' modes of mobility in the Black Sea region. Among them is Kelly O'Neill's book, which describes Crimea as a Russian "southern empire" closely interconnected with the worlds of Greek merchants and the Ottoman Empire.¹⁴ In her study of Russian Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca, Kane demonstrates how the Russian state monopolized travel on the Hajj by establishing state-sanctioned routes and boosting its own steamship company (ROPiT) as the main travel agent for religious pilgrimage to both Mecca/Medina and Jerusalem. In doing so, the Russian Empire expanded its geographical reach using new routes through the Black Sea, while simultaneously amplifying the movement of people across it.¹⁵ In his study of migration across the Russian and Ottoman Empires, meanwhile, Andrew Robarts highlights the density of exchange, both official and non-official, and focuses on one unintended side-effect of this cross-border exchange: alongside people, diseases like plague and cholera also spread across imperial borders. This posed a tremendous challenge for the administrations of both states, threatening lives and economic prosperity on either side. Therefore, Robarts's story is one of mobility and of non-mobility: Especially during the spread of diseases and the immediate aftermath, Russia and the Ottoman Empire tried to reinforce their border regimes in order to prevent or at least obstruct uncontrolled transimperial movements, thereby contributing to and encouraging illegal practices such as smuggling, corruption, and others. While mobility in the modern period is often conceived in terms of popular movement outside of the absolute control of the state, state-induced forced mobility and its devastating consequences for the Circassians, Crimean Tatars, and other populations around the Black Sea form another node of research.¹⁶ Yet another line of research focuses on the exchange of ideas and knowledge across the Black Sea and into Europe and the Ottoman Empire.¹⁷ Most recently, a significant amount of research has been devoted to the mobility of cultural goods, forms of everyday life and leisure and tourism in the Black Sea region.¹⁸ Mobility across the Black Sea and its shores was a crucial element for the economic prosperity of the region; it comes as no surprise that the closure of borders and routes corresponded, generally speaking, to phases of economic and political uncertainty.

The forms, practices and, repercussions of mobility and non-mobility are at the core of all four articles comprising this special issue.

In her contribution, Pınar Üre introduces an important yet largely overlooked community connecting the northern and southern shores of the Black Sea – "White Russian" refugees to Turkey in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Making their way into Turkish republican society as a "skilled labor force," such refugees were both agents of Turkey's modernization as well as cultural ambassadors, for example, merging Russian and Turkish dishes into a trans-Black Sea cuisine. Üre argues, in fact, that this connection forged by refugees from Russia helps us to better understand Turkish modernization as multipolar, not entirely reliant on any one

model or actor.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, skilled labor moved from south to north and assisted in Russian modernization. Alexandros Levantinos, a mining engineer from the Ottoman Empire, is at the center of Iannis Carras's biographical study. Carras uses the case of Levantinos to demonstrate the immense reach of mobility across and beyond the Black Sea region in early modern period. Born in the Pontus region, the engineer eventually ended up in the silver mines of Nerchinsk, supported and sponsored directly by the Russian state. Carras shows that the individual connections required by Levantinos to establish his position in Russia existed in tension with his ability to move freely across state boundaries.

Dealing with the second half of the twentieth century, Etienne Forestier-Peyrat emphasizes the ambiguous effects of the Black Sea's divide during the Cold War, when NATO confronted the Warsaw Pact at the Soviet-Turkish border. Here, stasis, rather than mobility, may strike us as the defining factor of the Black Sea region. Going beyond geopolitics, however, Peyrat pays close attention to local factors and cultural entanglements such as individual cross-border mobility, resource exchange (gas), and the important role of tourism and leisure on both sides of the border. This allows him to draw a more subtle picture of the Black Sea: The region appears to be divided and connected at the same time.

Finally, Michel Abeßer focuses on one particular location, where two settlements on the shore of the northern Black Sea—a Russian core and an Armenian colony—gradually merged into today's city of Rostov-on-Don. Using the lens of economic cultures, his contribution demonstrates this movement towards each other was by no means linear and always peaceful. Instead, the story of migration and Rostov's interethnic co-existence is characterized by interaction and conflict as well as cooperation and distinction.

Taken together, all four contributions shed light on different forms of exchange and non-exchange on mobility and stasis between various groups and regions and on the role of states in promoting or preventing such mobility. While the Black Sea in some cases appears to be a contact zone, in others it is more a divisive border. For historians, the Black Sea itself clearly remains a "frontier zone" of historical research, bringing scholars from Russian and Middle Eastern Studies together and forcing them to rethink their own assumptions and mental maps.

About the authors

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Endnotes

- 1 Yavuz Aslan, Mustafa Kemal-Frunze Görüşmeleri: Türk-Sovyet İlişkilerinde Zirve (İstanbul: Kaynak Yayınları, 2002), 111. Frunze's delegation to Ankara is pictured on the cover of this special issue of *Euxeinos*.
- 2 For this contemporary perspective on coastal shipping, see: Türkiye Cumhuriyeti Ticâret Vekâleti, Yıllık: Türk Deniz Ticâreti (İstanbul: Ticâret-i Bahriye Müdüriyeti, 1927), 4 and passim. The builders of the Bulgarian nation-state held similar views about their recent past and sought to ensure their economic and scientific command of the Black Sea shores. Such efforts on the part of Bulgaria were not lost on Turkish observers, who quickly translated Bulgarian works on the Black Sea as an example of what Turkey might accomplish, too; see: Sava Nikolov Ivanov, Černo more: Obštodostâpni studii, Kn. I (Varna: Edinstvo, 1925), translated into Turkish as: Sava N. İvanof, Çaradeniz (İstanbul: Ticâret ve Şanâyi' Odası Ticâret ve Şanâyi' -i Bahriye Şu'besi, 1928).
- 3 Daniel Fields, "State-Imposed Place Name Change in Turkey and the Response of Giresun Residents" (MA thesis, Sabancı University, 2013); Rıfat N. Bali, Bir Kıyımın, Bir Talanın Öyküsü: Hurdaya (S) Atılan Matbu ve Yazma Eserler, Evrâk-ı Metrûkeler, Arşivler (İstanbul: Libra, 2014).
- 4 Arzu Öztürkmen, "Remembering conflicts in a Black Sea town: A multi-sited ethnography of memory," *New Perspectives on Turkey* no. 34 (2006): 93–115.
- 5 The first Turkish publishing house devoted to the Black Sea region was Serander, which was established in Trabzon in 1999. It has published 27 issues of the journal *Karadeniz İncelemeleri Dergisi* (Journal of Black Sea Studies) since 2006; its articles focus heavily on the history of the Black-Sea region in Turkey. The first Turkish journal devoted to Black Sea studies was *Karadeniz Araştırmaları* (Black Sea Studies), which began publication in 2004 under the auspices of the *Karadeniz Araştırmaları Merkezi* (Center for Black Sea Studies) and has published 61 issues to date. The journal has the expressed aim of conducting research on the geostrategic importance of Turkey, the history and culture of the Black Sea region, and regional Turkic cultures. Recently, it has published a series of special issues devoted to the countries and regions on the Black Sea's northern shore. The journal *Karadeniz* (Black Sea) began publication in 2009 and has published 43 issues to date. The relevance of its articles to Black Sea studies has become increasingly tenuous. Finally, the *Karadeniz Araştırmaları Enstitüsü* (Institute for Black Sea Studies), housed at Trabzon's *Karadeniz Teknik Üniversitesi*, edits the journal *Karadeniz Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Dergisi* (KAREN) (Journal of the Institute for Black Sea Studies) and has published 7 issues since 2015. While KAREN is the most consistently relevant to Black Sea studies, like *Karadeniz İncelemeleri Dergisi*, it remains heavily focused on the Turkish Black-Sea region. *Karadeniz İncelemeleri Dergisi* publishes articles in Turkish, and rarely in English, while the other three journals also accept, and occasionally publish, articles in Russian. It is difficult, however, to ascertain how "international" such efforts truly are. In addition to these journals, the *Karadeniz Stratejik Araştırma ve Uygulama Merkezi* (Center for Strategic Research and Practice on the Black Sea) has held a number of conferences with the stated aim of bringing scholars from around the Black Sea together. The Turkish publishing house *İletişim* has led the way in the approach of reclaiming "forgotten" aspects of Black Sea identity and reviving academic interest in the region's ethnic minorities; among others, this work is representative of the trend: Uğur Biryol, ed., *Karadeniz'in Kaybolan Kimliği* (İstanbul: İletişim, 2014).
- 6 Elena I. Druzhinna, *Kyuchuk-Kainardzhiyskiy mir 1774 goda: Ego podgotovka i zaklyuchenie* (Moskva: Verlag der Akademie der Wissenschaften der UdSSR, 1955); Elena I. Druzhinna, *Severnoe Prichernomor'ye v 1775–1800 gg.* (Moskva: Izd. Akademija Nauk SSSR, 1959).
- 7 Among many others: Patricia Herlihy, *Odessa: A History, 1794–1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Kerstin S. Jobst, *Die Perle des Imperiums: Der russische Krim-Diskurs im Zarenreich* (Konstanz: UVK, 2007); Stella Ghervas, "The Black Sea," in *Oceanic Histories*, eds. David Armitage,

- Alison Bashford, and Sujit Sivasundaram (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 234–267; Isabel De Madariaga, *Russia in the Age of Catherine the Great* (London: Phoenix Press, 2002 [1981]).
- 8 Workshop participants included Michel Abeßer, Fabian Baumann, Timothy Blauvelt, Ninja Bumann, Etienne Forestier-Peyrat, Boris Ganichev, Dominik Gutmeyr, Kerstin Jobst, and Pınar Üre. For a summary of the proceedings, see: Ali Sonay, “Tagungsbericht: The Black Sea in Trans-Imperial and Transnational History: An International Works-in-Progress Workshop,” in *H-Soz-Kult*, (23 February 2019), <https://www.hsozkult.de/conferencereport/id/tagungsberichte-8128>.
- 9 Eyüp Özveren, “Frontier-Function & Civil Society: The Black Sea World in the Past and Its Prospects for the Future,” in *Black Sea Politics: Political Culture and Civil Society in an Unstable Region*, ed. Ayşe Güneş-Ayata, Ayça Ergün, and Işıl Çelimli (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 19.
- 10 Charles King, “Is the Black Sea a Region?” in *The Black-Sea Region: Cooperation and Security Building*, ed. Oleksandr Pavliuk and Ivanna Klympush-Tsintsadze, (Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe, 2004), 13–26.
- 11 Indeed, the question of whether maritime regions can a priori be studied as discrete historical units itself runs through the field of transnational and global history; see: Michael Pearson, “Oceanic History,” in *A Companion to Global Historical Thought*, eds. Prasenjit Duara, Viren Murthy and Andrew Sartori, (Chichester, U.K.: John Wiley & Sons, 2014), 337–50. For a good overview of the development of a Black Sea regional historiography, see: Stefan Troebst, “Geschichtsregion Schwarzmeerwelt,” *Südosteuropa Mitteilungen* 48, no. 5–6 (2006): 92–102; idem, “The Black Sea as [a] Historical Meso-Region: Concepts in Cultural Studies and the Social Sciences,” *Journal of Balkan and Black Sea Studies* 2, no. 2 (June 2019): 11–29. Troebst rightly highlights the pathbreaking work of Turkish historian Eyüp Özveren in conceptualizing the modern history of the Black Sea as a coherent regional history. Özveren’s major works in this regard include: Eyüp Özveren, “The Black Sea World as a unit of analysis,” in *Politics of the Black Sea: Regional Dynamics of Cooperation and Conflict*, ed. Tunç Aybak, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 61–84.
- 12 The most popular literature on Black Sea history remain the overviews by Ascherson and King: Neal Ascherson, *Black Sea: The Birthplace of Civilisation and Barbarism*, Rev. Ed. (London: Vintage, 2007); Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press, 2004). Kerstin Jobst, Stefan Rohdewald, and Stefan Troebst are in the process of co-editing a generalists’ handbook on the history and culture of the Black Sea region, which offers a framework for historical study entailing multiple structural features: ideas and identities; mobility and transfers; and violence, conflict, and conflict resolution. Between 2012–’15, a research group in Greece analyzed and published data on the interconnections of port cities around the Black Sea under the auspices of the “Black Sea Research Project;” see: <https://blacksea.gr>.
- 13 Constantin Ardeleanu, “The Opening and Development of the Black Sea for International Trade and Shipping (1774–1853),” *Euxeinos*, no. 14 (2014).
- 14 Kelly O’Neill, *Claiming Crimea: A History of Catherine the Great’s Southern Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
- 15 Eileen M. Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
- 16 For an impressive example of recent research on this topic, see: Vladimir Hamed-Troyansky, “Imperial Refuge: Resettlement of Muslims from Russia in the Ottoman Empire, 1860–1914,” (Ph.D. thesis, Stanford University, 2018)
- 17 A large research project situated at the University of Graz studies forms of knowledge exchange between Europe and the Black Sea region and has already launched its first publication: Dominik Gutmeyr and Karl Kaser, eds., *Europe and the Black Sea Region. A History of Early Knowledge Exchange (1750–1850)* (Berlin: LIT Verlag, 2018).

- 18 “Forum: Food, Wine, and Leisure in the Black Sea Region,” in *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 19, no. 2 (Spring 2018); Christian Noack, “Coping with the Tourist: Planned and ‘Wild’ Mass Tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast,” in *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist Under Capitalism and Socialism*, ed. Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016), 281–305.